

Message Text

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PAGE 01 SAN SA 00013 041417Z
ACTION ARA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3029
INFO AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA
AMEMBASSY MANAGUA
AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE
AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA
USCINCSO

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 0013

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, ES
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION PROCESS STUCK IN LOW GEAR

1. THE NEW YEAR'S ARRIVAL MEANS THAT THE ELECTORAL PROCESS THAT WILL SELECT A SUCCESSOR TO OUTGOING PRESIDENT ARTURO ARMANDO MOLINA HAS A SCANT SEVEN WEEKS TO GO. FEBRUARY 20 WILL MARK THE CONCLUSION OF CAMPAIGNS BY THE GOVERNMENT PARTY PCN AND THE OPPOSITION COALITION UNO, THE FORMER'S SLATE COMPOSED OF GENERAL CARLOS HUMBERTO ROMERO AND DR JULIO ASTACIO AND THE LATTER'S MADE UP OF RETIRED COL ERNESTO CLARAMOUNT AND DR. ANTONIO MORALES EHRlich. THE TWO CAMPAIGNS HAVE BEEN LACKLUSTER TO DATE, WITH NEITHER EXHIBITING EITHER IMAGINATION OR MUCH POPULAR FERVOR OR FOLLOWING.

2. ON THE PCN SIDE, THE EMPHASIS HAS BEEN ON PRESENTING THE TWO CANDIDATES IN SLICK RADIO AND TV SPOTS, POSTERS, AND RALLY APPEARANCES THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY AS GOOD FAMILY MEN, CONFIDENT OF CITORY, WHO WILL ESSENTIALLY CARRY ON THE PRESENT REGIME'S PROGRAMS IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF RESPECT FOR THE LAW. ROMERO'S ADS REFER TO HIM AS "THE LEADER", AND WHAT IS MISSING IN TERMS OF POLICY AND SUBSTANCE IS MORE THAN MADE UP FOR IN SONOROUSNESS.
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PAGE 02 SAN SA 00013 041417Z

THE OVERALL TONE OF THE PCN CAMPAIGN IS SUMMED UP IN THE SLAIM GOING AROUND THAT "ROMERO IS NOT RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT OF EL SALVADOR, BUT TO BE POPE OF CENTRAL AMERICA." ROMERO SPEAKS OF HIS DEDICATION TO DEMOCRACY, A BETTER LIFE FOR ALL SALVADORANS, PROTECTION FOR THE FAMILY AS THE CORNERSTONE OF SOCIETY, AND THE NEED FOR PEACE AND HONESTY IN GOVERNMENT. THIS IS AS DEEP AS HIS MESSAGE GOES. SMALL WONDER THAT FEW ARE

WATCHING HIS TV SPEECHES, AND EVEN FEWER DISCUSSING HIS PROGRAMS AND IDEAS AFTERWARDS.

3. OF SOMEWHAT GREATER SURPRISE, AND DISAPPOINTMENT TO THOSE WHO WERE EXPECTING A VIROROUS IF FORE-DOOMED UNO CHALLENGE, HAS BEEN THE LIMP, ALMOST RELUCTANT CAMPAIGN OF COL CLARAMOUNT. STREET RALLIES AND MARCHES HAVE YET TO OCCUR, AND THE UNO MESSAGE SO FAR HAS BEEN CONFINED TO SHORT RADIO AND TV SPOTS. BADLY OUTFINANCED BY THE PCN, CLARAMOUNT AND THE UNO ONLY HAVE A LIMITED NUMBER OF ANNOUNCEMENT VARIATIONS ALL OF WHICH MIMIC THE RIVALS IN SIMPLISTIC MESSAGE CONTENT AND LACK OF ORIGINALITY IN PRESENTATION. THE PRINCIPAL VEHICLE IS A TV SPOT COMPOSED OF AN INANIMATE MILITARY PORTRAIT OF THE COLONEL, WITH A VOICE OVERLAY DESCRIBING HIS COMMITMENT TO THE NATION, THE FAMILY AND HONEST GOVERNMENT.

4. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT NEITHER CANDIDATE IS TURNING ON THE VOTERS. IN THE CASE OF ROMERO, IT PERHAPS DOESN'T MATTER. HE SHOULD WIN HOWEVER HE PERFORMS IN THE PRE-ELECTION PROCESS. HE IS NOT DOING OR SAYING ANYTHING THAT WOULD FRIGHTEN THE NATURAL CONSTITUENCIES OF THE GOVERNMENT PARTY - THE PRIVATE SECTOR, THOSE WHO FEAR SUBVERSION AND PUBLIC DISORDER, AND THE MILITARY OFFICER CORP . EVERYONE KNOWS HE'S A TOUGH, NO-NONSENSE ADVOCATE OF LAW AND ORDER. ALMOST EVERYONE CONCEDES HE WILL BE THE NEXT PRESIDENT. THOSE WHO DON'T ACCEPT THE INEVITABILITY OF ROMERO'S ASSUMPTION OF POWER SPEAK OF A LACK OF ENTHUSIASM AMONG THE MILITARY FOR ROMERO (FOR CLARAMOUNT AS WELL) AND OF THE POSSIBILITY THAT "SOMETHING WILL HAPPEN" BETWEEN NOW AND THE JULY 1 INAUGURATION TO DENY ROMERO THE OFFICE. AS OF JANUARY 1. THIS APPEARS TO BE WISHFUL THINKING.

5. IT IS HARDER TO UNDERSTAND THE CAMPAIGN TACTICS OF THE UNO. CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 SAN SA 00013 041417Z

THERE ARE ISSUES - FROM EVIDENCE OF MASSIVE CORRUPTION THROUGH-OUT THE MOLINA REGIME, TO THE RECENT ISTA FIASCO, TO A LACK OF NOTICEABLE PROGRESS IN AMELIORATING THE NATIONS AWESOME PROBLEMS. THESE AND OTHER ISSUES WOULD APPEAR TO OFFER AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR A HARD-HITTING CAMPAIGN BY AN OPPOSITION, WHICH WHILE DOOMED NOT TO ASSUME POWER NEVERTHELESS WISHED TO PRESENT ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS AND POLICIES. CLARAMOUNT DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE THE VEHICLE FOR SUCH A CAMPAIGN. ALTHOUGH THE NEXT SEVEN WEEKS COULD CONCEIVABLY WITNESS DRAMATIC CHANGES IN THE STYLE AND SUBSTANCE OF EITHER, OR BOTH, CAMPAIGNS, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT SUCH IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN. LOZANO

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